Medicine and Religion

Threefold cord of religion, science, and literature in the character of Sir Thomas Browne

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The tercentenary, Browne 300, inspired from the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital, provides an incentive in an age of intense specialisation to review the achievement of a great doctor who pursued a different course and fused in himself three major disciplines. In his commonplace book he describes how the bones from the charnel house of St Paul's, more than a thousand cartloads, were transported to Finsbury Fields when the ground was being prepared to build the new St Paul's by Christopher Wren, another comprehensive genius, whose birth 350 years ago we are also commemorating this year. The whole of old St Paul's was cleared, partly by gunpowder, and the bones from the charnel house, the site of the present crypt, were transported to Finsbury Fields, "and there laid in a moorish place with so much soil to cover them as raised the ground for three windmills which have since been built there, grinding food for the living on the bones of the dead."[1] Our prayer today is that the dry bones of Sir Thomas Browne may receive the breath of the spirit so that we share his zest for life, his special sense of humour and happiness—in other words, bread for our living in the twentieth century. We are not historians happening to gather in church. We are pilgrims ourselves trying to create a new community of love on planet earth, something more human than we have yet achieved. In Browne's words:

> "In yellow meadows, I take no delight
> Let me have those which are most red and white."

Sir Thomas synthesised religion, literature, and science. In his *Religio Medici* mercy and truth met together and reason and imagination kissed each other. Our international gathering is to stir in one pot science, religion, and literature. This was Browne's historic role, not to keep disciplines in compartments but to allow each to fertilise the other. Those to whom we owe most in rediscovering Sir Thomas Browne—Sir Geoffrey Keynes, Professor Frank Livingstone-Huntley, Mrs Joan Bennett, Professor Basil Willey, and Professor Charles Raven—all wrote as men and women who cared about the integration of human knowledge and especially of religion, science, and literature. They were all attracted to Browne because of his triple concern.

There can be no recovery of religion without a recovery of poetry and no survival for mankind without science, which is humane and disciplined and compassionate. Browne reminds us of the dazzling potentiality of the human mind when it opens itself to the best. "Surely," he says, "there is a piece of divinity in us, something which was before the elements and owes no allegiance to the sun." The piece of divinity we can only accept by faith. But it is no blind faith, but faith in the life of the spirit.

From a sermon at St Peter Mancroft, Norwich, on 25 June 1982.

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He saw Christianity as a high water mark of humanism. "Humanism," as R H Tawney said "is the antithesis not of Christianity but of materialism."[2] Browne incarnated the wisdom of the old Hebrew preacher who taught long ago that "a threefold cord is not quickly broken" (Ecclesiastes iv, 12).

How good that we are doing this in Norwich, for Browne, though he gained much from Winchester, Oxford, Montpellier, Padua, and Leyden, believed in the genius of this place. I link him in my own mind with two great women in the City—Dame Julian and Edith Cavell. Julian declared, despite grim suffering and major tragedies, that "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well," because she believed, like Browne, that in every human personality there is a part which is untainted by evil. Edith Cavell, coming from a vicarage near here, founded scientific secular nursing in Belgium, met a tragic death during the first world war, and declared that, "I have seen death so often that it is not strange or fearful to me. . . . Standing as I do in view of God and eternity, I realise that patriotism is not enough. I must have no hatred or bitterness towards anyone." Browne also refused to join the bitter religious and political hatreds of his day, though he remained a quiet Royalist. He had the reputation of remembering the names and personalities and characteristics of his patients. It matters that some doctors, like some parsons, should live in inner cities. Of course we must be magnanimous to others and ourselves, especially in old age when we forget names, like that old gentleman at a school reunion who said to a friend "Let me see, was it you or your brother who was killed in the war?" Today we honour someone who stayed in one place and really knew its people and its story, giving that high value to relationships we all laud in theory but find so hard in practice.

Mirror of his age

Edmund Gosse described Browne as a mirror of his age. When Browne looked at himself in the mirror he thanked God that he had escaped the sin of pride, and then proceeded, with entertaining naivety, to list his six languages and his knowledge of the names of all the constellations and most of the plants of the country. To read Browne must make everyone, now and then, long for gritty lucidity. One feels that in his mirror he saw very little agony, poignancy, or the struggles of the twice born. He questioned received orthodoxy, such as the mediaeval symbolist's belief that nature is personal, and insisted on rigorous analysis. But there were blocks in his scientific objectivity, his pre-Copernican astronomy, his belief in witches, and the literal truth of the creation stories in Genesis. But still he insisted that tradition must be questioned and that human reason is competent to verify and falsify. He outlined a theology of trust—here we remember the teaching of Dame Cicely Saunders. We can trust human life to have a meaning. We can trust the universe to be on our side.

Look at the Browne monument here which describes his piety, integrity, and learning.

His *piety* was a blend of prayer, worship, and study. He was among those believers who reinterpreted God from the concept of the omnipotent king to the concept of the internal persuasive spirit—the crucial reinterpretation of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. It was Browne, not Jung or Don Cupitt, who said, "We carry within us the wonders we seek without us. There is all Africa and her prodigies in us."

In his understanding of Christianity his science, poetry, and faith interacted on each other. Some Christian traditionalists still think that "scientific creationism" should be taught alongside evolutionary theories. I sense that Sir Thomas Browne's desire to hold scientific, poetic, and religious truths together would lead him to agree with the philosopher witness at the recent Arkansas trial who said that, "If God exists, he cannot possibly want us to turn our backs on reason and sense, ostrich-like burrowing our heads in the comforting but arid sands of Genesis."[3] Genesis is poetry and religion about "Why," not exact science about "How."

His epitaph in this church next points to his *integrity*—finding out for ourselves, not leaving it to the book and to eyes other than our own. One of the delights of living in Norfolk is to sail out of the mud at Morston or down the narrow channel from Blakeney, along the coast towards Wells. Here you pass, in summer, great gatherings of seals. Here, too, you can see Blakeney Point, one of the largest meeting points for terns in all Europe. Browne inquired about a whale stranded on this piece of coast. It was typical of his determination to find out for himself, to do a dissection and not rely on the old authors. He shared that determined curiosity of Isaac Newton, Christopher Wren, and the other members of the Royal Society. But he had to make the most of East Anglia and rarely if ever visited London (though his son was a lecturer at the Barber-Surgeons). His own garden and house were a small botanic garden and domestic zoo. He dissected a dolphin and persuaded Lady Browne to dress and cook it and make an excellent savoury dish of it. Browne sent collars of it to the King's table after his return to Newmarket, which were "well liked of."

The King's recognition of Browne was the new age recognising the old. Mr Ketton-Cremer wrote, "By 1671, Browne's opinions, as well as his style, were becoming somewhat out of date. New currents of thought, new discoveries and methods in medecine and chemistry were beginning to circulate. Science and reason were attaining a new standard of lucidity and order; and Browne, with his soaring and cloudy speculations, the stately eloquence and loaded splendour of his writing, his insurmountable belief in witchcraft and alchemy, belonged to the age which was passing."[4] In Sir Geoffrey Keynes's gentler words, "He is the great amphibian, the man torn between two worlds, ancient and modern, which he tried to reconcile with integrity."

The third ascription in this church is *most learned.* His wisdom consisted not only in his accumulated information or his astonishing Baroque style but in the fusing of medicine, religion, and literature. Listen to his goodbye in a colloquy with God. It is in the form of a prayer:

> "The night is come like to the day,
> Depart not thou, Great God, away.
> Let not my sins, black as the night
> Eclipse the lustre of thy light.
> Keepe still in my horizon, for to me
> The Sunne makes not the day, but Thee.
> Thou whose nature cannot sleep
> On my temples sentry keep.
> Guard me 'gainst those watchful foes
> Whose eyes are open while mine close . . ."

He ends his verses with these sentences: "This is the dormitive I take to bedward; I need no other Laudanum than this to make me sleepe; after which I close my eyes in security, content to take my leave of the Sunne, and sleepe unto the Resurrection."[5]

Heart of his faith

The heart of his faith lay in his prayers, his personal devotion. He prayed for his patients, for his family and especially for his son, Tom, and for himself. Prayer was, we might say, the helix in which his entwined concerns rose heavenwards.

Let me recall you to those windmills erected on the cartloads of bones of the past. If the dry bones of even the most attractive and intelligent commemoration are to live, then we must welcome the movement of the wind of the spirit. Only so can food be made for our minds and characters today. The message which Browne suggests is the need for binding together the insights of science, religion, and literature. This is what he tried to do in this city 300 years ago. This is what we are called to do in our own cities round the world today, letting the spirit which comes from God move our minds a little further, so that we take a few more risks for the new life. We need a new passion for a new quality of life for everyone, and not leave this to our political leaders. Doctors, scientists, writers, all need to share in righting the wrongs of our time, the anxiety which grips us, the dark clouds of nuclear overarmament, racist intolerance, gross poverty in the Third World, and loneliness and materialism in our cities. We should all take risks for the new life, and risks which require us to go further in piety, in integrity and learning, to be reborn when we are old, standing not on our dignity but on our duty to devote ourselves to God and humanity.

Entertain the possibility of truth in religion. Let us agree that there are uncertainties, mysteries, doubts which go with us on our pilgrimage. These do not rule out concern with the immeasurables in religion and poetry. One day all mankind will trust, not to wealth, power, and manipulation, but to the three-fold cord of science, religion, and poetry. Let us each resolve to hasten that day.

References

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MATERIA NON MEDICA

Geometric cookery

Most of our Christmases have been complicated by exams, moving house, or new babies; in difficult years all three. It was at such a time that I started to make novelty birthday cakes for our children. My then 2 year old son and I built our first cake house as a form of mutual psychotherapy. We designed our ideal home, covered with sweets, while my husband swotted for his MRCOG in a barricaded study, the baby girned, and prospective house buyers probed in the cupboards.

This year my daughter asked for a Rubik cube cake, which has proved much easier to make than the real cube was to solve. It is rather a small cake as we have planned rather a small party; with the house up for sale it is better not to have a riot in progress at peak viewing times such as Saturday afternoons. Eight child units is probably the maximum sized party for a medium sized house; one child unit being one 4 year old girl and one 4 year old girl being the equivalent of 0·2 6 year old boys.

The cake's shape was carved from two round seven-and-a-half-inch sponges stuck together with melted jam. Thick glacé icing coloured with red, yellow, blue, or mixed colouring coated the sides. The lines were painted with a child's paintbrush loaded with thin black (red, yellow, and blue combined) icing. The finished cube is now being stored until needed in the fridge to inhibit downward drift of icing on the vertical faces, but it will be put on display in the kitchen when house viewers are expected. It all adds to the ambience.—DIANA DRIFE, part-time general practitioner, Bristol.